Elk in and around the Hanford Reach National Monument

In 2000, the Monument was set aside as "a biological treasure, embracing important riparian, aquatic, and upland shrub-steppe habitats that are rare or in decline in other areas. Within its mosaic of habitats, the monument supports a wealth of increasingly uncommon native plant and animal species, the size and diversity of which is unmatched in the Columbia Basin." Of those native animals, elk are one of the most visible, the most charismatic, and currently the most controversial of the species the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and Department of Energy (DOE) manage.

Eliminated from the Columbia Basin in the 1850's, Rocky Mountain elk were reintroduced in various locations throughout Washington between 1913 and 1930. In 1972, elk were first noticed in the Rattlesnake Hills area. In their *Elk Strategic Management Plan*, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) speculates that "these animals came from the Yakima population directly west of the Arid Lands Ecology Reserve (ALE) some thirty airline miles distant" and are likely the descendants of "a reintroduction herd resulting from an initial transplant of 50 Rocky Mountain elk from Gardiner, Montana, in January 1913 and an additional six elk from Montana purchased from Manitou Park in Spokane in 1913." Thanks to the efforts of the WDFW and others, the public now has populations of elk to enjoy in eastern Washington.

Wherever the local herd came from, they have successfully re-established themselves in the Columbia Basin. From 1984 to 2000, the herd doubled every three to four years, growing from approximately 50 animals to over 800. With FWS management, the herd was reduced by 415 animals. In 2000, the FWS initiated a short-term action in cooperation with the WDFW, Native American tribes, and DOE to trap and relocate 171 elk from the ALE. In 2002, an additional 32 elk were trapped and relocated. During this same period, the effects of the 24 Command Fire temporarily forced elk off the Monument. Coupled with liberalized hunting seasons established by the WDFW on adjacent private and public lands, an additional 212 elk were harvested.

These short-term actions, while effective, were temporary, and the elk population rebounded. With the growing elk population came increasing instances of crop damage, finally reaching a breaking point for some adjacent landowners, particularly dry land wheat farmers. Longer hunting seasons, the increased volume of requests to hunt, and the need to control hunters and to protect private property severely overburdened the landowners' ability to conduct normal ranching and farming operations. Recognizing that something more needed to be done, the agencies responsible for managing this herd have been working to find both short- and long-term solutions as their laws and policies allow.

For long-term management, scientific information is needed and used to understand how this elk herd functions, where and why it moves, and what the population is across its entire home range.

A better understanding of the herd will lead to an effective management plan that meets the WDFW goal of approximately 350 animals. Elk that were radio-collared by the DOE (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory) in the 1990's have provide some insight to land managers on elk movement. To better understand herd dynamics and population trends, the FWS initiated aerial surveys in 2002. Aerial and ground counts, conducted in coordination with the WDFW, showed that these elk use a wide variety of public and private lands and that numbers on the ALE fluctuate widely between seasons, from a low of 44 and a high of 336 in spring and summer to 264 to 670 in fall and winter.

Elk movement and numbers on the ALE were the responsibility of the DOE until 1997, when the FWS became the manager. Because this wide-ranging herd makes use of the Monument, other public lands, and interrmingled private lands, any strategic actions aimed at long-term population control would require the committed involvement of these and other federal agencies, as well as local governments, private landowners, tribes, and conservation and sportsmen's groups.

The WDFW currently has two plans aimed at this local elk herd—the *Rattlesnake Hills (Hanford) Elk Strategic Management Plan* (2000) and the *Yakima Elk Herd Management Plan* (2002), which looks at the larger herd. (The Rattlesnake Hills Elk Herd is a sub-herd within the Yakima Elk Herd.) In these plans, the WDFW notes that "the immediate management need of this resource is not to provide recreational opportunity but to control the growth of the elk population and lessen the adverse impacts of elk in the area as soon as possible." The plans also recognize the need for coordination between agencies, noting that "the [FWS] has cooperated to help the state meet the goal of maintaining this sub-herd at approximately 350 as an interim plan until a plan is developed for the [Monument]."

As part of long-term planning for elk, the FWS has concentrated its efforts on getting the Monument's first overall management plan (known as a Comprehensive Conservation Plan or CCP) out for public review and comment. All national wildlife refuges are required by law to develop a CCP that guides management of wildlife (including elk), wildlife habitat, other resources, and public use and access.

Development of the CCP, and the associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), began in June, 2002, and is being developed in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The NEPA and FWS policies mandate a process with full tribal and public involvement prior to major decisions being made. In addition, the President, through the Secretary of the Interior, appointed a local citizens Federal Planning Advisory Committee (FAC) to insure that local voices and interests were considered in the development of the CCP/EIS. Over 50 meetings with affected tribes, 20 FAC meetings, and numerous public open houses and workshops, have assured that this planning effort is a truly open to sovereign nations and the public.

As part of CCP development, the FWS has relied heavily on advice from the FAC. In 2005, the FAC provided formal advice on long-term elk population control for inclusion in the CCP/EIS, recommending "that the [FWS] have all the population management tools that are available to professional wildlife managers" and that it "[prohibit] all recreational hunting on the ALE" while "allowing the [FWS] to use non-[FWS] (State, Tribal, public), as well as [FWS] personnel for population control." This advice compliments Resolution 04397 from the Benton County Board of

Commissioners calling for cooperation between the Monument and WDFW to "develop specific measures—both near and long-term—to manage the Rattlesnake Hills elk population" and "that these measures should include the use of federal and state-preferred population management methods, including the full array of hunting options." Accordingly, the FWS is including all viable options for elk population management in its planning process, including an idea, yet to be developed, that would use tribal and state-licensed hunters for population control.

While CCP development has been a lengthy, but important, public process, the end is in sight. Although there are internal approvals needed before its release, the draft CCP will hopefully be available for public review later this summer—a draft that includes the full array of options that will enable the FWS to assist the WDFW and others in the long-term in maintaining this elk herd at approximately 350 animals as identified in WDFW plans. Once the FWS incorporates public comment into the final CCP, it can legally begin to implement significant long-term management actions.

Different interests have called for the opening of the ALE to public elk hunting or the construction of a fence. These are long-term actions, requiring analysis under the NEPA. Since the FWS is currently in the NEPA process, short-term, emergency actions are all that are available at this time. Opening a closed unit of the Monument to a new use (i.e., public hunting) would violate the NEPA, subvert the public planning process currently underway, and ignore the advice of the FAC.

While long-term efforts are the best way to ensure a healthy, stable population, there has been and is a need for short-term actions for this growing elk herd. In addition to the trap-and-relocation programs, when elk were first recorded on the Wahluke Unit in 2002, the FWS immediately responded to WDFW, landowner concerns, and sportsmen by opening the area to elk hunting. Since the 57,000-acre Wahluke—located in Grant, Adams and Franklin Counties—was already open to hunting and other public uses, the FWS was able to immediately add elk to the species that could be hunted. This is significantly different than the ALE which has never been open to the public.

In 2004 the FWS initiated and funded an Elk Summit in Prosser. Conducted in coordination with the WDFW, the workshop was attended by interested and affected stakeholders and resulted in recommendations for both short- and long-term population control. At the workshop, the FWS committed to numerous actions, including meeting with landowners to discuss their concerns, flying additional surveys, and paying half the costs of hazing elk from agricultural lands onto the Monument. Additionally, the FWS continues to be on track with getting the CCP out to the public later this year that looks at the full range of recommended elk populations control actions.

One of the short-term actions proposed at the Elk Summit was additional trap-and-relocation of elk. The FWS has looked into this option, but several factors led to its dismissal—for this year—the chief one being a lack of funding.

In an effort to be responsive to landowner concerns and to continue to assist the WDFW in elk population control, a government cull was added to our short-term actions as a last resort. However, the FWS has decided not to conduct a government cull this season due to earlier than expected elk movement off the Monument, strong FAC advice, and public reaction.

Another short-term action, hazing, has been somewhat successful (based on crop damage claims). However, while hazing operations were successful, some landowners adjacent to the Monument who felt not enough was being done by WDFW and the FWS closed their lands to public hunting and asked local elected officials for help. Other adjacent landowners simply wanted more flexibility from the WDFW in how they managed elk hunting on their property.

Crucial to developing a long-term management plan for the Monument is tribal and public participation, and we encourage you to participate. To reach your FAC representatives, for more information, or to be added to the planning mailing list, please call (509) 371-1801, e-mail us at hanfordreach@fws.gov, or visit hanfordreach.fws.gov.

Images on this page are stock images and were not taken on the Monument.